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CLAREIRA: TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE REPRESENTATION OF ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a photography based research project on the representation of architectural space. From a phenomenological perspective, the investigation aimed to find a visual approach that would contribute to the representation of architectural space as a place for experience. Trindade subway station, by architect Eduardo Souto de Moura, was chosen as a case study, functioning as a laboratory for the experimentation of visual strategies that emphasize the physical presence and sensorial perception of the photographer, as well as the presences of users.

Keywords: photography, architecture, experience, subjectivity, presence

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Introduction

This paper presents a photography based research on the representation of architectural space, taking Trindade subway station, in the city of Porto, as a case study. Taking a phenomenological perspective, its main objective was to investigate and experiment on photography's possibilities, as a tool to approach and communicate the experience of architectural space. Considering that images are increasingly consumed as substitutes for the buildings they represent, the project investigates ways in which they may act as mediators of experience – eventually inviting physical presence – and not as mere symbols. Can they go beyond conceptual representation, triggering sensorial memory and exploring deeper connections to spaces, even when they have never been visited by the viewers? Departing from approaches centered on the expression of architectural concepts and ideas, the research delves into the material existence of buildings over time and how their spaces are used and experienced. This positioning stems from the acknowledgment that such approaches are currently scarce¹ and that they can benefit users as well as architectural practice. On a formal level, the project seeks to move away from the legacy of photographic objectivity, by assuming a purposefully subjective perspective.

1.1 Objectivity and subjectivity in photographic representations of architectural space

The debate between objective and subjective approaches has been present in photographic practice and theory from its very beginning². Moving beyond long dismissed issues of legitimacy, the significant influence of objective perspectives and the dominance of what came to be known as the cool school movement in contemporary photography has been largely acknowledged³. This is particularly true for photographic practices that address issues of space, landscape, architecture and urban environments. At the onset of modernism, when architectural photography as a genre reached a point of consolidation⁴, architecture's emphasis on function and rationality met the emergence of a new photographic approach in which the concern for objectivity, dictated formal abstraction and developed a "dispassionate, sharply precise style"⁵. Authors such as August Sander, Werner Mantz, and

¹ Elwall, R. (2004). *Building with Light – The International History of Architectural Photography*. Merrel Publishers.

² Lechowicz, L. (2000). Objectivity and subjectivity in photography: a few theoretical and historical remarks. *Format*,(4), 2,3.

³ Badger, G., & Parr, M. (2006). *The Photobook: A History*, Vol.2. London: Phaidon.

⁴ Higgott, A., & Wray, T. (2012). *Camera Constructs: Photography, Architecture and the Modern City*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

⁵ Elwall, R. (2004). *Building with Light – The International History of Architectural Photography*. Merrel Publishers p.120.

Renger Patzsch, initiated a tradition of objectivity, reclaiming a certain form of realism, grounded on sharpness and tonal detail, as the true nature of the photographic medium⁶.

Their legacy, acknowledged by such influent figures as Bernd and Hilla Becher, has crossed generations. The two photographers had a fundamental role in the resurgence and continuity of photographic objectivity, not only by taking it to a radical level, through the development of a very precise capture and display method but also by influencing a generation of students, which came to be known as the Düsseldorf School. The visual grammar developed by this movement has acquired a significant degree of dominance in contemporary photography⁷.

In this tradition, emptied spaces, elevated perspectives, overall sharpness, and even lighting, have performed what Cánovas described as an "aesthetic and affective voiding"⁸. Besides the disappearance of the human figure, it is the suppression of the observing subject that this strategy pursues, as if concealing the photographer's position would leave us before the object only. In the words of David Company: "the appearance of the subject matter demanded a disappearance of the author"⁹. Nevertheless, this disappearance seems to concern only the subject's body. In a purely conceptual process, the subject-author – now bodiless – finally imposes himself on reality, by means of a concept.

As claims of objectivity have been challenged and the real itself was questioned, formal manifestations of these concepts subsist and are often mere perceptive and representational habits, using a very well tested visual grammar. When it comes to representations of architecture and urban environments, this formula often produces detached images that place us as disembodied observers of crystallized, contextless objects and are evocative of concepts, more than actual environments.

⁶ Phillips, C. (ed.) (1989) *Photography in the modern era: European documents and critical writings, 1913 – 1940*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Aperture.

⁷ Stimson, B. (2004). *The Photographic Comportment of Bernd and Hilla Becher*. In *Photography and the Limits of the Document*. London: Tate Publishing. Retrieved from <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/01/photographic-comportment-of-bernd-and-hilla-becher>.

⁸ Cánovas, C (2015) *Cercanía y distancia, presencia y ausencia*. In I. Bergera (Ed.), *Sobre Fotografía y Arquitectura*. Ediciones Asimétricas.

⁹ Company, D. (2003). *Art and Photography*. New York: Phaidon.

Contemporary arguments for an architectural design that places embodied experience at the core of its concerns¹⁰ ask for approaches that can provide insights into the experience of space, namely that of its users¹¹.

Let us then turn to a different and scarcer legacy, that of photographers who have explored the uses of space and their subjective experience. Such approaches can be found throughout photography's history, from Edwin Smith and Eric de Maré who were, in their time, "at odds with the mainstream"¹²; to John Donat who advocated for an approach of architecture as a social space; or Guido Guidi, whose photography has been described as a "healthy antidote to Düsseldorf's cold objectivity"¹³.

Contemporary photographers such as Rut Blees Luxemburg and Guy Tillim have explored sensorial suggestions and depictions of movement, of human presence and its traces, achieving a sense of the real that goes beyond the imitation of vision. While observing how space is appropriated by people and transformed by time and use, their images produce a sense of immersion and bodily presence, providing relevant testimonies and interpretations, regarding reflection on the use and experience of architectural space¹⁴.

Interestingly, another German school provided a counterpoint to the austere approach to which German photography is most often associated. In the 1970s and 80s, the Essen School developed a very distinct practice and understanding of photography: purposefully subjective, poetical and highly sensorial. Photographers such as Michael Schmidt, Volker Heinze, and Gosbert Adler have explored spaces of intersection between subject and object, researching photographic aesthetics where spontaneity and sensorial perception play a central role. Instead of observing from a distance, they engage with the environments they explore, assuming to be part of them¹⁵.

Referring to Schmidt's project *Waffenruhe*, Ute Eskildsen¹⁶ summarizes this approach to reality, saying that "Schmidt was able to translate photographically respect for perceptible reality – directed towards people – via the experiment of emphasizing subjective perception, without regard to exact description".

As used-up formulas prove themselves inadequate to address contemporary concerns for the humanization of urban space, the work of these photographers becomes the object of interest and revalorization. Their legacy's discrete continuity, through photographers and

¹⁰ Böhme, G. (1993). Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics. *esis Eleven*, 36(1), 113–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/072551369303600107>.

Pallasmaa, J. (2005). *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Zumthor, P. (2006). *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments – Surrounding Objects*. Birkhäuser Architecture.

¹¹ Elwall, R. (2004). *Building with Light – The International History of Architectural Photography*. Merrel Publishers.

¹² Elwall, R. (2004). *Building with Light – The International History of Architectural Photography*. Merrel Publishers.

¹³ Badger, G., & Parr, M. (2006). *The Photobook: A History, Vol.2*. London: Phaidon.

¹⁴ Rebelo, A. M., & Pombo, F. (2018). Photography and Designed Space : A Shift in Perspective. In O. Moret (Ed.), *Back to the Future. The Future in the Past* (pp. 559–563). Barcelona: Universidad de Barcelona.

¹⁵ Mandanici, S. (2017). A different kind of protest. *Aperture*, 53(12), 34–36. Retrieved from <https://aperture.org/blog/different-kind-protest-schmidt/>.

¹⁶ Eskildsen, U. (1995). In *Passionate Conflict Between Representation and Presentation*. In *Fotografien Seit 1965*. Retrieved from http://nordenhake.com/content/2-artists/39-michael-schmidt/1995_ute-eskildsen-eng.pdf, pp.16–23.

teachers like Joachim Brohm and Heidi Specker, has provided younger generations with a favorable ground in which to continue the exploration of photographic subjectivity, finding new approaches for contemporary issues.

1.2 Architecture and presence

Peter Zumthor's *Atmospheres*¹⁷ provided this research with its most important theoretical reference. In the first chapter, two photographs by G. E. Kidder Smith and Hans Baumgartner, are presented as a personal reminder of the architect's aims for his own work. He asks himself: "How could I design something like the room in that photograph?" "Can I achieve this as an architect - an atmosphere like that, its intensity, its mood?".

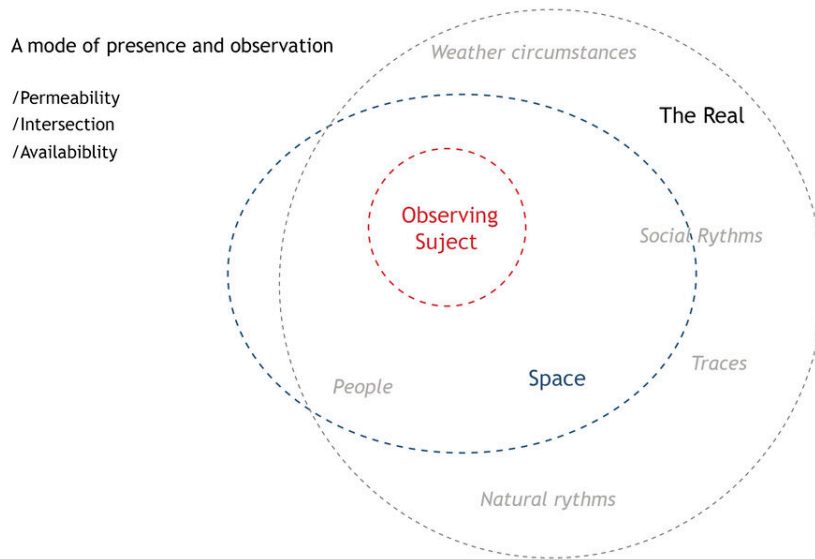
From the perspective of this investigation, an inversion of this last question finds particular relevance: how can photography communicate the atmosphere of designed spaces? Zumthor's account of the concept of atmosphere was key to our field research, for it reveals a mode of observing the real that is very suggestive in photographic terms. In a passage later in *Atmospheres*, he describes a scene he observes from a particular viewpoint, on a holiday, emphasizing the interaction between all of its elements. These elements are not only visual: there is sound, there is temperature, there are haptic sensations. The autonomy of each element, including Zumthor himself, their interaction and the configurations arising from that interaction, are what he calls "the magic of the real".

Zumthor gives clear indications about his position in space in relation to what surrounds him, as well as temporal references, underlining the momentary character of the "magic of the real". This concept is perceived as having a major role in the emergence of atmospheres.

In directing his attention to external elements, Zumthor does not suppress himself from the scene but rather participates in it, as a multi-sensory being. His positioning is particularly interesting when contrasted with objective stances that by means of distance and detachment, seek to suppress the observing subject, in order to have access to the "true" characteristics of things. It suggests a way of approaching the real from a phenomenological point of view.

The diagram depicted above represents this mode of presence and observation, inspired by Zumthor's description, as applied to our fieldwork. When approaching the research territory, we aimed for a state of permeability to the space around us, as well as to the external elements that change its atmosphere, such as human presence, weather circumstances, natural and social rhythms, and traces of past actions or events, that transform the building's surface for variable periods of time. The images seek to evoke intersections between these three elements.

¹⁷ Zumthor, P. (2006). *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments - Surrounding Objects*. Birkhäuser Architecture, p.11, 19.



Research diagram: "The Magic of the real" by Ana Miriam Rebelo

Also relevant to the research, was Gernot Böhme's¹⁸ understanding of the concept of atmosphere, especially for his considerations on its intermediate nature, between subject and object. Converging with Zumthor's thought, he equally stresses the importance of people, of things and their interactions with space in the emergence of atmospheres, which "are spaces insofar as they are "tinctured" through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations". The philosopher speaks of atmosphere as a "mindful physical presence in space"¹⁹. It was something of this kind that we aimed to find in our territory, in an attempt to work towards some degree of liberation from "the subject-object dichotomy"²⁰.

2.1 Fieldwork

As a practice-based investigation, despite the crucial role played by bibliographic and iconic research, it is in the domain of photographic practice that its main contribution is proposed. Printed object *Clareira* is the outcome of the experimentation process led in the field, where its findings are visually formulated.

Approaching our territory, Trindade subway station, by architect Eduardo Souto de Moura, the aim was to examine our experience of that environment, from an inclusive perspective. This means being attentive to our perception and sensory reactions to space itself but also to its dynamics, observing environmental changes and the presence of other people, whether they happened before us or were perceived through traces.

¹⁸ Böhme, G. (1993). Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics. *Thesis Eleven*, 36(1), 113–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/072551369303600107>, p.121.

¹⁹ Böhme, G. (2013). Atmosphere as Mindful Physical Presence in Space. *OASE*, (91), 21–32. Retrieved from <https://www.oasejournal.nl/en/Issues/91/AtmosphereAsMindfulPhysicalPresenceInSpace>.

²⁰ Böhme, G. (1993). Atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics. *esis Eleven*, 36(1), 113–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/072551369303600107>, p.120.

From the beginning, certain technical and formal options were avoided such as the use of elevated perspectives as a means to avoid perspective distortion; the use of frontal and centered points of view, that could lead to geometrical abstraction; the use of large or medium format cameras, as the sharpness they allow, was not a goal and especially as their use can limit freedom of movement and therefore condition framing; and the adoption of distant and elevated points of view, giving a sense of omniscience to the viewer. On the contrary, the quest was for immersion, for a sense of embodiment and for a form of spontaneity that might liberate framing from self-imposed restrictions, towards experimentation and openness to contingency.

A 35mm reflex film camera was used, with a 50mm lens. This allowed and implied movement, as the variation of scales and angles was aimed for, in order to imprint a dynamic character on the work. Closer to human perception, 50 mm lenses also give more accurate indications of the observer's relation to other elements.

Whenever possible the lens was used at its maximum aperture, which gives a slightly blurry aspect to images, restricting focus to specific points. In several images, this possibility was used to include blurry elements in planes that were very close to the observer. These options were used to achieve very specific, embodied perspectives, inviting the viewer to see what was then seen and to stand where we stood, making the observer's standpoint evident and giving indication of the direction and focus of its gaze. The subjective presence of the photographer is thus affirmed, standing in contrast to approaches where photographers seek to distance themselves to the point of disappearance²¹.

This choice of equipment and the constancy of certain technical options also had the advantage of giving framing a great degree of liberty and attention which was a central aspect of the practical research. We aimed for a free variation of angles, regardless of distortions, within the possibilities offered and limited by the photographer's physical stature, posing the viewer to relate to the use of the space and not to its analytical or contemplative observation.

Another aspect into which we made small steps, was the exploration of synaesthetic possibilities in photographic representation. A very defying subject, in this research, experimentation was limited to intersections between sight and haptic sensations, related to texture and temperature. This was pursued through close framing of textured surfaces, using short depths of field and through a non-realistic and variable interpretation of color temperature. This aspect was managed minding color's possibilities to suggest thermic sensations and to convey atmosphere.

The options just described relate to the way in which we chose to observe, something that is common to every element in the book. Regarding what to observe, our attention was directed towards expressions of time and movement in space, exploring both social and natural rhythms. Recurrently returning to the field, we sought to experience it under different circumstances and to observe the changing dynamics of its use. Traces of movement and

²¹ Cánovas, C. (2015). Cercanía y distancia, presencia y ausencia. In I. Bergera (Ed.), *Sobre Fotografía y Arquitectura*. Ediciones Asimétricas.

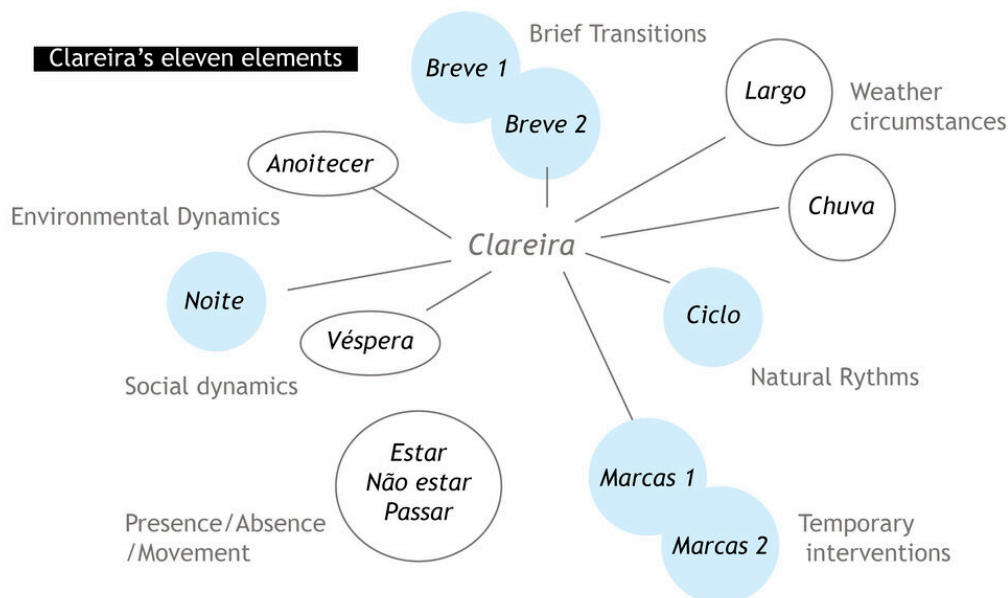
temporary interventions in the building were also explored, as signs of everyday uses and appropriations of space.

Different aspects of these dynamic changings in the atmosphere of this space defined the different elements that constitute printed object Clareira, as described in the next section.

2.2 Clareira

The diagram depicted below relates Clareira's eleven elements to the different temporal dimensions the project examined. These elements have different formats and bindings, designed to be consistent with the nature of the atmospheres each of them addresses and to enhance them through the reading experience they provide.

Two of these elements, Chuva and Largo, explore weather circumstances and how they change the way space is occupied by people. Their pages are bound by staples as in a classic magazine, providing guidance through a sequence of images associated in spreads. This was also the choice for Estar, Não Estar, Passar, which observes the quotidian activity of users as they move across, wait and less often linger in a place which is a building, but also a crossroad and a square.



Research diagram: "Clareira" by Ana Miriam Rebelo



ANA MIRIAM
Spreads from: "Clareira: Estar, Não Estar, Passar", 2018

Three small elements are accordion bound, offering different folding possibilities that allow the reader to associate images freely. The object can also be fully extended, or spreads can be observed individually. Noite and Anotecer were shot in low light conditions, one during the night and the other at twilight. In these cases, accordion binding favours the merging of images into each other.

The other accordion, named Véspera, addresses a specific day and time when social and natural circumstances favored a certain mode of presence in space. It has a postcard size that adds to its laid-back character. In Breve 1 and Breve 2, two sheets of paper folded in four evoke brief moments of transition in light and weather.



ANA MIRIAM
Clareira: Anoitecer", 2018

Images are revealed as the paper is unfolded, in one case simultaneously and in the other in a sequence of three moments. *Ciclo* focuses on the seasonal changes of a group of trees, placed at the center of the space. It is bound only by a ring, around which individual images are turned, having no beginning or end.

Two posters, *Marcas 1* and *Marcas 2*, document temporary interventions in the building, namely publicity and graffiti. Their shared format proposes the reader to relate and compare these very distinct forms of appropriation of walls.



ANA MIRIAM
"Clareira: Breve2", 2018

ANA MIRIAM
Page from "Clareira: Ciclo", 2018

Concluding Remarks

The impulse for this research was in a large measure a reaction to the voiding of space, the absence of time and the disappearance of the subject itself, led by a long tradition of objective approaches in photography.



ANA MIRIAM
 "Clareira: Marcas 1", 2018

Historical research was conducted to assess the origins and the development of this tradition and to identify alternative perspectives. Theoretical references from the field of phenomenology, informed the research and were transposed to the fieldwork, providing fundamental concepts and inspiring a mode of observation of architectural space. To a great extent, the search was for a mode of presence, a certain positioning of oneself in a given circumstance, an attitude before the real that might be able to find intersections between subject and object.

It was also about being attentive to other presences and to our sensory perception, aiming for a state of immersion and availability, anchored in our physical presence in space. The position the photographer assumes is the one he proposes the viewer, so the will for immersion and presence is an invitation to immersion and presence. The images never intend to be substitutes for the physical experience of architecture. On the contrary, they mean to invite viewers to pay closer attention to their perceptions of space. Clareira was conceived for the general public, with a special concern for the station's users, for whom it is part of everyday life. It aims to suggest other modes of presence in a space with which they relate, often in a distracted manner, where most people absent-mindedly wait or rush through and only rarely fully are. Perhaps to trigger sensorial memories that would otherwise be diluted in the flow of experience, perhaps to open up other possibilities for the perception and experience of this place.

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